

9. THE COMMISSION RECOMMENDS THAT CONNDOT ACT TO INITIATE THE EXTENSION OF DANBURY BRANCH METRO-NORTH COMMUTER SERVICE TO NEW MILFORD. PREVIOUS STUDIES CONDUCTED BY THE HOUSATONIC VALLEY COUNCIL OF ELECTED OFFICIALS IN 1996 AND BY HVCEO AND THE SOUTH WESTERN REGIONAL PLANNING AGENCY IN THEIR ROUTE 7 CORRIDOR STUDY (SEPT. 2000) SHOULD SERVE AS GUIDES FOR THIS SERVICE EXTENSION. THE COMMISSION URGES THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY TO MAKE FUNDING FROM THE GENERAL FUND AVAILABLE TO CONNDOT FOR THIS SERVICE EXTENSION SO THAT IT IS NOT ACCOMPLISHED AT THE COST OF CUTS TO EXISTING SERVICES. WE BELIEVE THAT THE HEIGHTENED AWARENESS OF TRANSPORTATION PROBLEMS, RECENTLY THE SUBJECT OF THE ATRANSPORTATION SUMMIT≡, SHOULD ENCOURAGE AND FACILITATE THE APPROPRIATION OF THESE FUNDS.

For ten years now, there has been an active local effort to promote the extension of the Metro-North Danbury Branch commuter rail service northward to serve Brookfield and New Milford. This effort began through a survey conducted in 1992 by the Rail Service Restoration Society, a local grass roots group. Then in 1995 and 1996, the Housatonic Valley Council of Elected Officials undertook a 2-phase study to evaluate ridership, costs and service parameters for the expanded rail service. That study projected a daily ridership of 559 at a capital cost of \$10.6 million for track rehabilitation and the construction of two intermediate stations between the existing Danbury and New Milford stations.

This proposal benefits from the fact that the 14.2 miles of track and the New Milford railroad station are already in place, along with ample parking at the latter. Some of the track will require upgrading to meet passenger service standards. Initial service could also be provided using existing equipment with no new purchase of rolling stock required.

Northern Fairfield County and southwestern Litchfield County constitute a rapidly growing area where comparatively available and inexpensive land and housing, relative to southern Fairfield County, are causing dramatic population growth. Existing congestion problems on US-7 both between Danbury and New Milford and between Danbury and Norwalk, will only worsen in the face of this new growth, much of which is connected to employment in lower Fairfield County or in New York. For these reasons, the Housatonic Valley Council of Elected Officials and the South Western Regional Planning Agency undertook the Route 7 Corridor Travel Options Implementation Plan, released in September 2000, to consider strategies to reduce congestion in this corridor. Though this Commission looks favorably on the other recommendations of the study, including more frequent Danbury Branch service and a bus link between the Norwalk Transit District and HART bus system hubs, we believe the extension of the rail service to New Milford is an especially logical element given the ways existing assets can be leveraged to implement it and the benefits it can provide to the Route 7 corridor in terms of removing vehicles.

Metro-North has recently extended the Harlem Line service northward from Dover Plains, NY to Wassaic, NY, on a previously abandoned portion of the Harlem Line, a line which once ran all the way to Chatham, NY. Extension of the Danbury Branch service to New Milford can be accommodated by using existing track, presently operated by the Housatonic Railroad. Unlike the more sparsely developed and mostly residential land uses along the Harlem Line extension, the New Milford extension would also serve significant commercial and office uses.